

# Lessons from early adopters: governance

## Together with Tenants briefing

20 October 2020

An integral aspect of [Together with Tenants](#) is resident oversight of the organisation's performance against the charter commitments. Early adopters each interpreted this in their own way, but for many a review of governance structures and functions was an important part of their implementation journey.

This briefing shares experiences from three housing associations that have already adopted the Together with Tenants charter on of how their structures were reviewed, and how changes were made in relation to governance, in order to fulfil the charter commitments.

At the end of this briefing we provide further information on the NHF Code of Governance.

## Experiences from L&Q

Our work on Together with Tenants started with a strategy meeting where the whole non-executive governance structure was present, including our resident panel and board members. Following from that meeting L&Q commenced an overarching governance review and a strand of that review was on the voice of residents.

In order to sustain the buy in and maintain the gravitas we engaged external consultants (from The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny) to review our existing approaches and make recommendations for improvements. They delivered their report in a coordinated way alongside the broader review of governance – again reinforcing that resident voice is an essential part of the overall governance of the organisation rather than an “add on”.

The review was taken to our existing resident structure for comment and onwards to Group Board.

Group Board ultimately agreed the recommendations of the review and a task and finish group of Group Board was set up to oversee the implementation of the overarching governance review and the resident voice element. We moved swiftly to close down an element of the existing structure that did not fit with the recommendations and appointed a chair of a new resident-led committee of our Group Board (known as Resident Services Board).

The pre-existing senior resident group was established as a shadow Resident Services Board to work through the key elements of setting up the board.

Through ongoing working we established a suite of guiding documents for the new board, many of which as you would expect – terms of reference, person spec for new board members, a skills framework – and some more unusual – for example, a protocol between the new board and Group Board seeking to navigate-the multifaceted role of this new committee and how it would interact with L&Q’s Group Board, and a measurable set of success factors to be used to monitor ongoing success and development of the new structures.

All of this was subject to the scrutiny of the Group Board task and finish group which sought to ensure what was happening with the new Resident Services Board was pushing in the same direction as the overall governance changes.

We are currently at the stage where we are out to recruitment for the final form of the new Resident Board – so have designed specific recruitment processes to attract a more diverse group of skilled residents focussing on motivations and skills but being open to these coming from a wide range of experiences.

Throughout all of the above the aim has been to boost the prestige of the resident voice. For us the new group gets legitimacy in part from adherence to the NHF Code of Governance and following established governance norms such as transparent, skills based recruitment.

This has been a very careful journey trying to bring everyone with us but soon we will be in the position where we have overhauled the top of our resident structure and made it into a very serious governance group. The new group will lead the reform of the rest of our resident involvement approaches – the new Resident Services Board has in its terms of reference a permanent subgroup that we are calling the “joining the dots” group. This group will be able to bring in other members of the resident structure and informal engagement and its main aim is to draw together the broader voice of residents to enable the new Resident Services Board

to act as an effective channel for the wider resident voice. Alongside this we have boosted the officer resources to support resident involvement and help ensure that this is seen as a corporate and strategic activity.

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## Experiences from Home Group

We've had a customer promise for a number of years but the advent of Together with Tenants gave us a push to review it and ensure colleagues, customers and contractors were more aware of it.

We wanted the promise to be about what is important for Home Group customers. Although it meets the six commitments of the charter, our customers have tailored the charter to meet their needs and priorities. The promise has become so key to the organisation that we amended our strategic goals to include it and our performance against it forms part of our decision making around our mutual pay award for colleagues. Customers are currently working on a report to say how we have performed against the promise.

We already had feedback and scrutiny structures in place with our customers, but we wanted to align these with the customer promise and ensure we had robust mechanisms in place. We designed an accountability framework to show how customer feedback and scrutiny fits in to the organisation. Part of the framework includes looking at how our forum feeds in to Home Board. Each forum focuses on two of the six promise standards and senior leaders attend to respond to questions and take actions.

We already had two customer board members, and we have now arranged a regular slot at Board for customers to talk about key issues from the Customer Forum. Each meeting brings a different topic. Examples to date are Financial Inclusion, Creating a Positive Complaints Culture Training, Home Group's response to coronavirus and many more.

We designed a development package for customers who might be interested in joining a board or management committee, at Home Group or elsewhere. The package included development around confidence, questioning skills, expectations and the type of issues boards are likely to cover. We received incredible feedback from the customers and colleagues involved and one of the customers who

completed the course was successful in becoming our new Customer Board Member.

Here's our customer, Ron Bowes, talking about his involvement in some of the initiatives inspired by Together with Tenants:

“I have been a Home Group customer for many years. Late in 2018 after attending a local open day to meet other customers and Home Group colleagues I became an involved customer joining the viewpoint team. This led to increasing the involvement to include customer promise assessments, estates walkabouts, customer forums and contractors meetings across Scotland and England. I found this fulfilling and it gave me an additional interest in my retirement.

In late 2019 I had the opportunity of attending a board training course. This was both enjoyable and informative and gave me a good understanding of how the board functions and what is looked for in a board member. I submitted an application in March 2020 for the Scottish Board. I was subsequently interviewed and later appointed as a customer member of the board in August.

It's a new venture and I am enjoyed being involved. It's a challenge but with help and learning I am currently receiving I hope to become a productive board member”

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## Experiences from Coastline

Coastline took the opportunity of being early adopters of the Together with Tenants programme to accelerate the modernisation of our scrutiny function. In the last year we have made significant progress

We have moved from a Customer Scrutiny Committee of 12 who had regular, formal meetings with formal reports produced for Board, to an online group of up to 60, called the Customer Experience Forum. Its membership is determined by their representativeness of the broad customer demographic, who meet online, and use the Trust Charter as a foundation for scrutiny.

Meetings are topic based, and Board reports have been reimaged to make them more accessible for customers, who cited finding them daunting to contribute to. We have received positive feedback from the Board about this new form of updates.

We have launched the Coastline Conversation, on Flex MR – this is a digital platform with blog, forum, quick poll, open poll, and newsfeed functionality – to increase customer engagement and bring a more diverse range of customer voice to the Board reports. The customer-facing aspect is engaging and enables quick and in-depth consultation on matters that are key to our teams, but also enables customers to raise community issues and success stories. The back room aspect enables us to analyse interactions and target our recruitment and consultation.

Up to 500 customers can get involved in the Coastline Conversation, and the platform also hosts the Customer Experience Forum, whose focus is performance and scrutiny. In addition to this, we have introduced Mystery Shopping, created a training calendar for customers to access, revamped the Funding and Grants offer to make it more accessible, celebrated success via the TPAS scrutiny week online, and revisited the Local Offers to update them ready for launch this autumn. Historically our Customer Scrutiny Committee membership was not representative of our broader customer base – notably they were predominantly of retirement age, lived in the area local to the offices, and were not working. We're pleased that they have moved on the journey to our new Customer Experience offer with us, and been integral in establishing the Trust Charter. We now have membership from shared owners, people who are working, people who live at a significant distance from the office, and those whose physical disabilities would have precluded them from involvement before meetings were held online.

While we currently have 11 members, the skillset within the group is high, and the ambition to affect real change is apparent, so we are positive that the new method of recruitment is enabling customers who are keen to be involved to make a real difference.

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## The NHF Code of Governance

The first commitment in the Together with Tenants four-point plan is a change to NHF Code of Governance to ensure that being accountable to residents became a characteristic of a well-governed organisation.

Introducing a stronger requirement at board level to involve residents in decision-making will help ensure organisations value the voice and experience of residents

and supports the aim of Together with Tenants to build stronger relationships between residents and housing associations.

The new NHF Code of Governance 2020 will be published soon. You can [find out more on our website](#).